

Music Notes – The Sunday of All Saints

This Sunday, for the pragmatic reason of being a “gathered congregation” that doesn’t so easily come together for weekday festivals, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, which technically fell on Wednesday, 1st November, in the past week.

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist is *Missa O quam gloriosum* by the Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611). Victoria is seen as one of the three substantial “legs” of the Renaissance composing tradition, alongside Palestrina (1525–1594), with whom he may have studied, and Lassus (1532–1594), alongside whom Palestrina worked in Rome. There is what might be described as an emotional pecking order here, with Palestrina considered as having the most refined, emotionally austere style of the three composers, Lassus following with a rhythmic and harmonic intensity several notches warmer, and then Victoria whose style is imbued with a passionate quality not found in the other two. Victoria’s music tends to use less overtly complex counterpoint, relying on changes of texture and internal harmonic dissonance to create excitement and drama in his music. Most notably, whereas Lassus largely obeyed what were perceived to be the “rules” of musical composition, and Palestrina adhered almost ruthlessly to them, Victoria had no compunction about writing phrases that completely broke with the rules. If the phrases served to heighten the emotional intensity of the piece, he just went for it.

Of the three composers, Victoria’s output is the smallest. This explanatory quote is from the preface for his book of *Masses*, published in 1583: *I undertook for preference the setting of that which is universally celebrated in the Catholic Church ... for what should music serve rather than the holy praise of the Immortal God from whom number and measure proceed, whose works are wonderfully ordered by a kind of harmony and consonance?*

In fact, composing wasn’t Victoria’s only activity by any means. He was also a priest, having studied in Rome at the Collegium Germanicum. He was ordained by Thomas Goldwell, who by then the last surviving English Bishop from before the English Reformation – certainly a cosmopolitan route to the cloth. Victoria then joined the Fathers of the Oratory, the congregation founded by Philip Neri. In due course, perhaps wanting a quieter life, he went to be Chaplain and Chapelmaster at the Royal Convent of the Barefoot Nuns of St Clare in Madrid where, according to the broadcaster, conductor and Renaissance music expert Bruno Turner, he did less and less to the end of his life. His last known work – but what a work! – was the *Requiem* he wrote for the Dowager Empress Maria’s funeral in 1603.

This mass setting is preceded historically by Victoria’s jubilant motet of the same name, which we will be hearing at the *Offertory*, so let’s begin there. It was written in 1572, and is one of the most marvellous examples of the art of the motet. Strictly speaking, the text belongs to the Second Vespers of All Saints, which is also the eve

of All Souls: *O how glorious is the kingdom, in which all the Saints rejoice with Christ! Arrayed in white robes, they follow the Lamb wherever He goes.* Rather than treat the prospect of the afterlife with gloom, the music is radiant with joy. There is a delightful moment at *sequentur Agnum (follow the lamb)* where the texture suddenly thins out, and each of the voices sings in turn a little syncopated phrase in canon, one after the other – i.e. one following the other.

The motet opens with distinctive exuberant chords. As an opening statement, it is spectacular, and perhaps for this reason, although the mass setting uses the parody form (using an existing motet to quote from as a jumping-off point for fresh inspiration), it rather conspicuously doesn't use the motet's opening as a source of quotation. Instead, the *Kyrie* starts with music from the second set of entries in the motet, which is music altogether more suitable for this moment. In fact, Victoria never uses the dramatic opening music of the motet, not even for the *Gloria*, but instead harvests from elsewhere all kinds of other subsidiary motifs that drive the music's composition. The parody mass procedure was not much longer for this world, having already been used for at least an entire century by various composers before Victoria took up his pen for this setting. Initially, it had been adhered to rather strictly, but later composers became increasingly flexible in their treatment of the procedure. Victoria's approach is very loose, simply alluding to his earlier work rather than chopping out an almost literal chunk for re-working at the start of every movement, as had been the practice in the past.

Hearing motet and mass in the same service, we will have a chance of catching a bit of melody in the motet that you recognize as also being in the mass. You might or might not feel that this adds to your enjoyment of the music. Until the twentieth century, most people usually only heard music that was contemporary to them, and a great deal of it was being newly minted all the time around them. So, the chances of ever knowing a piece well enough to pick up the references to it in a mass setting were close to zero. Yet, for the composer of sacred music, the link between the two would be very clear, and, moreover, the extra layer of meaning in the motet's words and seasonal associations would be important. These elements would be mainly known by the composer, mostly also by the performers, and by God – that is until modern musicology came along. There was, therefore, a real personal and inward devotion for the composer and to some extent for the performers in these works. We continue to observe these connections in the programming of the Priory Church's music, ensuring as far as possible that the music is appropriate to the Sunday and service at which it is performed. In this way, our musical tradition links into centuries of devotion by church composers and musicians alike.

Both the *Kyrie* and the *Agnus Dei* of this setting end with the affecting "following passage" from the motet, used roughly verbatim, and so framing the whole setting. This suggests that for Victoria it was the idea of "following the Lamb" that formed

his private devotional background to the creation of this work. Nothing could be more appropriate as an ending for the *Agnus Dei*.

Evensong begins with an introit set by the British composer Joseph Phibbs (b.1974). He studied at King's College in London and then at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Along the way, he had composition lessons with Param Vir (b. 1952), Harrison Birtwistle (b.1954) and the late Steven Stucky (1949–2016) – which is a pretty good grounding – and he has been quite a prolific contributor to the musical life of the country. This is a setting of the introit for All Saints Day. Phibbs has written about this piece: *This short, celebratory setting, originally composed as an introit for the Wells Cathedral Girl Choristers, was arranged for SSATB in 2010 (the upper parts unaltered) for the Exon Singers Festival. The text exists in a number of versions, and here honours 'all the Saints, at whose solemnity the angels rejoice'. The texture, essentially imitative, is governed by a syncopated melodic phrase which gives way to softer material in the middle section. The return of the opening idea drives the piece towards a broad, jubilant conclusion. The text translates thus: Let us all rejoice in the Lord celebrating a festival day in honour of all the Saints, at whose solemnity the Angels rejoice, and give praise to the Son of God. Rejoice in the Lord O ye just: praise becometh the upright.*

The canticles are by the great Yorkshire composer, Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988). In his case, the precise location where he was born and lived is more consciously relevant than for many. He wrote of himself: *Any natural composer is a product of his background, experience and training, and I like to think that my music has the characteristic qualities which have been described as vigour, forthrightness, and emotionalism tempered with common sense.* These canticles, known as *Collegium Magdalenæ Oxoniense* (*Magdalen College, Oxford*), were written in 1960 and dedicated to Bernard Rose (1916–1996), with whom he had studied and who was the great *Informator Choristarum* (or, as we would say, Director of Music) at Magdalen College. They are Leighton's first set of canticles – in 1972 he was to write another set, known simply as his *Second Service*, that can instil real fear into many organists' hearts. This first set are a little less anxiety-inducing, and reflect a style of composition characteristic of its day. Leighton was in any case capable of a wide range of musical language, and adapted his approach very much to the target performer and audience alike. This set seems to complement particularly well what one might hear in an Oxbridge choral foundation. They are very well-crafted, capturing one's attention throughout and using vivid effects of word painting. For example, at the end of the *Gloria* to the *Magnificat*, the text *world without end* is repeated by each voice in a texture of increasing complexity, until you certainly get the point of the words, and the final *Amen* really has a quality of "so there!" about it.

The anthem is *Faire is the Heaven* by William Henry Harris (1883–1973). He was a British organist and composer, and variously assistant organist of Lichfield

Cathedral, New College and then Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and finally St George's Chapel, Windsor. Somewhere along the line, he picked up the nickname "Doc H", by which he was always known to his choristers wherever he went. This anthem, dating from 1925, when he was at New College, has remained his most popular work. It is a simply ravishing piece in eight parts, being split into two separate choirs for antiphonal and combinative effects. The text is taken from a considerably longer poem, *A Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, by Edmund Spenser (1552–1599), a contemporary, therefore, of Victoria.